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CLAIMS

1.   System for selecting a preferred data provider from a plurality of data providers, the system comprising:

5   means for receiving a request for data from a client;

means for receiving client identification data from said client;

means for identifying a plurality of data providers capable of providing data to said client;

means for providing said client identification data to said data providers;

10   means for instructing said data providers to perform the steps of:

(i)   sending a test signal to said client;

(ii)   receiving a return signal from said client;

(iii)   obtaining a measure of the elapsed time between the sending of the test signal and the receipt of the return signal;

15   (iv)   making a signal indicative of the elapsed time available to the system; and

(v)   making a signal indicative of their remaining capacity available to the system;

means for receiving elapsed time signals and remaining capacity signals from

20 said data providers;

means for selecting a preferred data provider on the basis of said signals; and

means for providing information relating to the identity of said preferred data provider to said client.

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2.   A system according to claim 1, wherein the means for receiving a request for data comprises means for receiving a request for one or more specific items.

3.   A system according to claim 2, wherein the means for identifying data

30 providers comprises means for searching for data providers capable of providing the specific item or items requested.

4.   A system according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the selecting means is arranged to select a preferred data provider from data providers having a remaining capacity above a predetermined threshold.

5   5.   A system according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the means for instructing said data providers comprises means for instructing the data providers to make available to the system a signal indicative of their remaining bandwidth.

6.   A system according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the means for
10   instructing said data providers is a means remote from the client.

7.   A system according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the means for providing information relating to the identity of the preferred data provider is arranged to provide said information on a web site.
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8.   A system according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the means for providing information relating to the identity of the preferred data provider is arranged to provide the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) of said preferred data provider.
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9.   A system according to any of the preceding claims, comprising means capable of selecting more than ' one preferred data provider according to predetermined criteria, and means for providing information relating to the identity of each preferred data provider to the client.
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10.   Method for selecting a preferred data provider from a plurality of data providers, the method comprising the steps of:
        receiving a request for data from a client;
        receiving client identification data from said client;
30   identifying a plurality of data providers capable of providing data to said client; ·
        providing said client identification data to said data providers;
        instructing said data providers to perform the steps of:

(i)   sending a test signal to said client;

(ii)   receiving a return signal from said client;

(iii)   obtaining a measure of the elapsed time between the sending of the test signal and the receipt of the return signal;

(iv)   making a signal indicative of the elapsed time available to the system; and

(v)   making a signal indicative of their remaining capacity available to the system;

receiving elapsed time signals and remaining capacity signals from said data providers;

selecting a preferred data provider on the basis of said signals; and

providing information relating to the identity of said preferred data provider to said client.

11.   A method according to claim 10, wherein the step of receiving a request for data comprises receiving a request for one or more specific items.

12.   A method according to claim 11, wherein the step of identifying data providers comprises searching for data providers capable of providing the specific item or items requested.

13.   A method according to any of claims 10 to 12, wherein the step of selecting a preferred data provider comprises selecting from data providers having a remaining capacity above a predetermined threshold.

14.   A method according to any of claims 10 to 13, wherein the step of instructing said data providers comprises instructing the data providers to make available to the system a signal indicative of their remaining bandwidth.

15.   A method according to any of claims 10 to 14, wherein the step of instructing said data providers is carried out by means remote from the client.

16. A method according to any of claims 10 to 15, wherein the step of providing information relating to the identity of the preferred data provider comprises providing said information on a web site.

5 17. A method according to any of claims 10 to 16, wherein the step of providing information relating to the identity of the preferred data provider comprises providing the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) of said preferred data provider.

18. A method according to any of claims 10 to 17, wherein more than one
10 preferred data provider may be selected according to predetermined criteria, and wherein information relating to the identity of each preferred data provider may be provided to the client.